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Biz of Acq-COIN

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Biz of Acq

COIN — Columbia Online Information Network

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Column Editor's note: Many academic and public libraries have or are contemplating the establishment of a local information network. I thought it would be valuable to hear how such programs are orchestrated. I first heard Ms. McLeod speak at a regional depository meeting on this topic and realized she had a valuable story to tell.

COIN, or the Trials and Triumphs of Setting up an Online Community Resource

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The **Columbia Online Information Network (COIN)** is a community information network established in 1993 for residents of a three-county area in Mid-Missouri. The project, the first in the state, began as a result of extensive discussions over several months among a variety of agencies based in Columbia, Missouri.

Partners in the project from the beginning were the city (Columbia) government, the local school district (Columbia Public Schools), the local public library (Daniel Boone Regional Library) and the University of Missouri. Other agencies have since joined in, including the county (Boone) government.

Up until this collaboration, I do not believe that these publicly-supported agencies had ever worked together in our area on a project with this scope. This may be one of the most exciting elements of the project: that a large number of disparate organizations with their own missions could work together so successfully. It probably needs to be said that, from the beginning, the enthusiasm, goodwill and dedication of the individuals* working on setting up the project were the key factors in its success. These people were convinced that this joint project could work. They were able to convince their respective agencies that a financial contribution would be of benefit to both their organiza-

tion and to the community as a whole.

The planning team met for several months to work out the logistics. This included developing the concept, deciding which services to provide and to whom, determining the technical needs, determining the financial structure as well as making the necessary decisions on the administration of the project and the staffing it would require.

Each of the agencies agreed to contribute a part of the funding, either in actual dollars or as in-kind contributions (e.g., the use of the software and technical support came from the University of Missouri Special Projects Group). The Library, in keeping with its mission as a key provider of access to information for the entire community, as well as the agency with the most open hours, offered to serve as the front end headquarters of the project. All of the agencies involved were tax-supported entities, therefore, tax dollars were being used to fund the project. An executive board would be set up with a representative from each of the cooperating agencies.

Because the Library is a regional system that covers a three-county area, the other Columbia-based entities agreed to the wider geographic scope with the expectation that other cities and counties within the Library's service area would eventually sign on.

It was decided that COIN would provide three principle services: (1) access to the Internet (originally available only in text format); (2) access to information provided by local government, schools, not-for-profit agencies and the like; and (3) email service.

COIN's first year budget was \$45,113 which purchased modem access equipment, a management workstation, the file server and printed materials. It also provided for staff: in the first year, funding was available only for a half-time position. Because of our role as the principle point of access to information for the community, the Library contributed additional staffing up to 120 hours per week. Technical support was provided by the University of Missouri-Columbia.

When the system came up in May 1993, the response was beyond any of our expectations. Since the University of Mis-

souri, which accounts for a third of the population of Columbia, had its own Internet/email system, we did not anticipate that the demand from the public would be as great as it was. In fact, as popular and as heavily used as our public library is, we had never seen such an immediate demand for any service as this, not even at tax-form time. City, county and agency officials who had probably never been to the library headquarters at the same time attended an electronic ribbon-cutting which opened the system. The media attention was very intense but generally positive. The success taught us something about the power of technology to impress the public.

The Library agreed to take on the project and to contribute staff time because we felt that this was a logical role for us to take. What came as a surprise was the level of demand on both the system and the library staff, which originally caused us some growing pains.

For example, individuals needed to sign up for an account to be able to use all the services, and there was no cost for an account: a person just needed to fill out an application form. (We had to use paper applications rather than electronic registration because the local public schools were a partner in the project and they required a parental signature giving approval for their child.) All that was asked was a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Without an account, anyone could log on as a guest, but this would limit their use essentially to being able to just view local data. A decision was made not to place any limits on who would be able to have an account, i.e., anyone anywhere could get a COIN account and could therefore do email, and there was no charge for this service. Of course, if a person lived long distance from this area, they would encumber long-distance telephone calls; but, individuals who could telnet to COIN could use the email service for free. This had interesting repercussions. Overnight, or so it seemed, the word went out over the Internet about the availability of free email service, so COIN was bombarded with applications.

The demand on staff was tremendous,
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as you can imagine. Each application had to be processed, a password generated, a form and explanatory information mailed out. Many people did not include a SASE, which may seem like a small problem — but not when you have over 8,000 people registering within the first year. Although a free service, people would call from other states (which were obviously not contributing any funds) and leave a message and expect COIN staff to return the call — also long distance — to explain how to log-in, for example.

Individuals who had never used a computer before would call and ask us how to set up their new computer and how to use it. As librarians, we were never expected to read to people or teach them how to read, but as providers of a new technological resource, users expected us to take over when the computer or software companies were not doing their part.

Some individuals thought that it was a free service, would dial-in long-distance, and then be shocked that they had incurred phone charges. People still call long-distance from places not within our service area and wonder why we don't provide an 800-number access to COIN for them, not understanding the costs involved.

Since the Library was the headquarters for the project, our front-line reference staff were bombarded with a new variety of questions — relating to the technical end of COIN or dealing with individuals competing for time on the public computers, wanting to CHAT for eight hours at a time.

To meet the large number of questions we were getting about the system and how to use it, the Library began offering instructional sessions. We now offer a drop-in session (a Q&A) each week as well as a weekly evening session on some aspect of using COIN or the Internet.

Other than an automatic one-hour online session time limit (when the system would automatically log-off), there were no limits by day or month for usage. An individual could re-dial immediately into the system, so the demand on the modem pool was beyond any of the originally projected expectations. Because of this demand and the need to add more modems, COIN began to get a reputation for always having a busy signal. And, of course, as with any new system, it will go down from time to time.

All signs of growing pains. We knew that we had a very successful project and that it was due to its success that the demands were so great. Since funding was limited by the amount each agency had agreed to contribute, the COIN Board

opted to do fundraising — in this case, asking the users to contribute as best they could to increase the modem pools. A Friends of COIN group was formed. COIN celebrated its first anniversary with a birthday fund-raiser which drew hundreds of people and raised \$25,000, which was used principally to purchase additional hardware to improve our service.

In the intervening few years, we have increased our modem pools to a level that now seems to handle the demands of our public, except in peak usage periods which we could probably never accommodate. Rarely do we get complaints anymore about busy signals, and rarely does the system go down. At the library, we finally decided to set some time restrictions on individual use of the limited number of public computers which has made our job a lot easier. No more eight-hour marathon CHAT sessions or fist fights among the patrons who wanted a turn on the computers.

By 1995, COIN staffing was being provided through a management contract with the Library. COIN's budget has increased to provide two full-time positions dedicated to COIN activities although the Library continues to contribute many hours of staff time. The University of Missouri-Columbia Campus Computing Department continues to provide technical support and to house COIN's server and the Columbia modem pool.

A year ago, the COIN Board decided to offer SLIP and PPP access, the graphical interface with the World Wide Web, to its users. After much debate, it was decided that individuals wanting SLIP would be able to receive it by making a donation of at least \$75 to the Friends of COIN. In contrast to the original offer of free email to anyone, this service is limited to residents of our three-county service area only. Their annual donation of \$75 provides 90 hours a month of SLIP/PPP access, in addition to their basic unlimited COIN service. We chose not to offer browsing software, because the licensing was too expensive. Other COIN users who opted to stay with the basic text-based version would still receive free service. At this time, over 600 individuals have added SLIP, and we have had over 850 donors to COIN during the past year. We expect to almost double our modem pool to about 165.

We have been working on developing local information files, offering free homepages to local nonprofit organizations. We have found that developing the local information is a slower process than one would hope. We have been making contacts with individual agencies, giving demonstrations, trying to show them the benefits of having their information available through the Internet. The COIN staff train designated organizational represen-

tatives to design and maintain their own homepages.

COIN's budget is healthy and able to grow. We know that some community networks sell space for personal homepages, but the COIN Board has chosen not to raise funds in that way. Because of the Library's input, we feel this network would be better served by building local organizational resources than by vanity pages. Nor do we charge people from outside our service area if they should want a regular COIN account (although this is something the COIN Board may be looking at).

Since its beginning in 1993, over 17,000 people have registered for COIN accounts, and there are currently over 10,000 active users. Any difficulties we have faced have actually been a result of the success of the project and of the huge demand for this service. As the pilot project for the State, beginning at ground zero, we encountered and dealt with many unexpected challenges which have been faced and met. Certainly there will be more challenges.

Summary

In summary, what have we learned from this experience?

— If possible, consider a collaborative project with other agencies in your area. This can have many positive effects including shared funding, brain power, technical expertise, public interest. This new shared interest could bring together organizations that never worked together before.

— If your library is the front end of a similar project, be prepared! This will take trained staff ready to deal with the demands of the technology as well as the people.

— Plan for training sessions for the public.

— Set parameters for role of staff in regard to service to the public. (For example, should they be expected to configure people's home computers.)

— Have up-to-date computer equipment and printers for the public. (We really didn't and it complicated our lives more than necessary.)

— Unless you have many commercial Internet providers in your area, expect a large response.

We are proud to say that COIN was the first community network in Missouri and that since then several others have followed and have been very successful in their communities. This year, the Missouri State Legislature approved three million dollars to help establish additional community networks across the state. Knowing Missouri's "show-me" reputation, and how difficult it is to convince the State Legislature to appropriate funds for new projects, we are particularly proud of COIN.